Paths to Productive Ageing

In Ghana, we feel that age has something to do with wisdom and experience of life, and from childhood we are taught to respect whoever is older than we are. It's important to have elderly people in the home. They help as babysitters. The family has someone to represent its interests at meetings of the village councils. The counsellors who advise the Queen Mother of the village are known as the Wise Old Women. The old people are always there at marriages and funerals, and they serve as morticians. They know how to dress the body. They do counselling—you can just go to an elderly person and pour out your heart about a family problem or a personal problem. People come by early in the morning on the way to work or travel miles to seek their advice, to have someone listen to them. It's said that the older people have "listening ears".

Nana Apeadu, Queen Mother of the town of Aburi, in eastern Ghana

Their situation has worsened over the last ten years of economic depression. Care of the ageing in the hands of the family is dwindling. We did a study about this, and the majority of the people interviewed said that 75 per cent or more of their children migrate. This is especially true of migration from the country to the city. That leaves most of the farms that produce for national consumption run by people from 50 years of age to 90 or more. A whole lot of old people are keeping the country going as farmers.

Dr. Nana Apt, head of the social work department at the University of Ghana

These two contemporary statements illustrate the tremendous contributions made by older persons in one particular country, as well as the challenge presented by the struggle for self-sufficiency. In other parts of the world the customs are different, but the needs and the potential contributions of the elderly are also crucial. And as is the case in Ghana, the situation worldwide is in flux. Traditional roles and support structures are changing shape or breaking down under the impact of economic, social and demographic forces.

Many policy makers, and older people themselves, are looking to amplify the opportunities for the elderly to take part in economic and social life. Serving as resources in the development of their communities, they stand to gain recognition, personal satisfaction and a measure of financial security.

The idea of "productive ageing" is gaining currency as the number of the elderly increases rapidly, both absolutely and relative to the rest of the population and in the developed and developing countries alike.

"Rather than looking at older people as frail and vulnerable, we should look at them as contributing members of society," says Irene Hoskins, repre-

sentative of two international organizations for the ageing to the United Nations. "This is also a way to combat the loneliness and despair often felt by the elderly themselves. Growing old does not make you a victim; it's a good thing to be able to live a long life."

But "productive ageing" is becoming as much a necessity as a virtue. In the developing countries, there are proportionately fewer young family members to support the old, and the old are generally left behind when their children migrate in search of work. Social and health services, which the elderly count on more than any other age segment, have been slashed, and in Africa and Latin America fewer jobs that come with pensions are available. In the developed countries, there are pressures to cut back benefits or coverage by private and public social security plans.

Senior enterprises

According to Helen Kerschner, president of the American Association for International Ageing, "A senior enterprise is essentially a small business which enables older people to participate in the economic life of the community by engaging in paid work outside the traditional work-setting." They may be set up by individuals or groups, or backed by public or private sector support. Many capitalize on the skills and traditional crafts of older people, and sponsored enterprises generally take pains not to displace other people from their jobs.

- In Vilcamba, Ecuador, representatives of HelpAge International noticed that there was no bakery within 40 kilometres. An old people's bakery with firewood ovens was established. Next, a tailoring workroom was set up for women and a plot of land was set aside for elderly men to cultivate medicinal herbs, with uses that were rapidly being forgotten in Ecuador. All three enterprises now produce jobs and income.
- "The Silver Generation", as they are known in Japan, are a rapidly growing portion of the population. Anticipating this trend in 1975, the Japanese Government began opening Silver Manpower centres in large cities. The centres receive work requests from public or private entities and negotiate job contracts for their elderly members, who maintain parks, restore traditional homes, garden, do bookkeeping and carry out other jobs on a transitory basis.
- In the absence of a national pension scheme for all older people, HelpAge Kenya is cooperating with the Ministry of Culture and Social Services to support elderly people in their own efforts to raise an income. The Mabatini goat-keeping project, run by a small committee mainly composed of elderly people, assists 34 older persons by providing each of them with a goat. The original intention was that the offspring of the goats would enable the project to be run on a continuing basis, as some goats could be sold and the profits divided among the project members.

One outcome of the project has been an improvement in status for elderly people, since in rural Kenya a person's position in society is measured by his/her ownership of cattle or land. For these older persons, owning a goat has provided a sense of pride and importance, and has also earned them the respect of the rest of the community.

Job training

Employers tend to restrict job training to younger workers. Yet older workers are generally the most experienced members of the workforce, have a proven capacity for learning and may be more likely to stay at an organization or enterprise than those who are younger. Downgrading this labour resource handicaps industries and countries seeking to improve competitiveness. It also hampers the careers of older employees in occupations undergoing changing technologies or methodologies, and places them at a severe disadvantage if they are laid off.

- Transitions, a programme of the provincial government of Ontario, Canada, provides people 45 years or older who recently have lost their jobs with $5,000 Canadian in training credits. These can be used in two ways: to cover the costs of training incurred by a new employer, or as tuition for employment-related education.

Community organizations

Active older people are at the forefront of community organizing and neighbourhood self-help projects in

rural and urban areas around the world. Community-based projects also offer mechanisms of support for the frail elderly that are inexpensive to mount and have a welcome personal touch. Many innovative efforts combine these two functions, and creatively match the needs and strengths of the young and the old as well.

- The UMMA Group ("umma" is an Arabic word for "community"), located in a multiracial, working-class neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York USA, discovered a circle of housebound elderly women who kept in touch with each other by telephone. The seniors extended their circle and set up a support network ensuring that all members are called daily to make sure they are all right. UMMA organizers then mobilized neighbourhood youngsters to go shopping for the seniors, and elderly seamstresses in turn give free sewing lessons.
- In Cairo, Egypt, about 4,000 Zabbaleen (a word meaning those who live on rubbish) retrieve recyclable materials from the quantities of refuse generated each day in the Egyptian capital. Yet one group of people, the Coptic Sisters of Cairo, has been working to improve their conditions and in particular those of some 200 elderly people who faced a bleak future.

In 1985, a programme was established with the Sisters to construct a multi-purpose centre to provide medical, nutritional and recreational facilities for the older Zabbaleen. In the common-room, a good meal is served once a day and social activities of all kinds are organized. The centre has a clinic that, besides giving priority to the elderly people, also provides service to the rest of the Zabbaleen community. The centre has also established an outreach programme for less mobile elderly people who are visited by medical staff and the Sisters themselves.

- The city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the United States, is home to descendants of the Sioux, Chippewas, Aninshabes and Winnebagos who once occupied the surrounding plains in the midwest of the United States. Through the Youth-Elder Connection, a programme of the American Indian Movement (AIM), young people run errands for and help maintain the properties of the elderly. On Saturdays, young and old go on trips to ancestral Indian lands and attend powwows. The youth hear folkloric stories and songs that bring their heritage alive, organizers say, and receive spiritual mentoring that helps them cope with difficult family conditions.
- Golden Age Clubs in the Jamaican township of St. Catherine provide training in culinary arts, sewing, broom making and other crafts. Some items are sold, others given to children. The clubs mobilize older people for public service—for instance, replacing a sidewalk destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert. Children are matched with elders and a cultural exchange takes place: the older people pass on their knowledge of the quadrille, a traditional dance form, and learn about reggae from the youths.

Volunteer opportunities

Retired or semi-retired people with financial security are a bulwark of volunteer organizations and service institutions. They possess skills, experience and judgement that are invaluable in virtually any setting. A United States Government study showed that physical and mental health improves among older people who volunteer. Volunteering is a long tradition in many Western European countries and an activity being developed in Eastern Europe by several non-governmental organizations in cooperation with Governments and the United Nations.

- The Geneva-based United Nations Volunteers (UNV) is one of the UN's foremost suppliers of middle-level and upper-level specialists. It has about 100 elderly volunteers, and their numbers are steadily rising. UNV's total force of 2,000 volunteers, with an average age of 38, serves in over 100 countries. Older volunteers are selected for: emergency relief measures following natural or man-made disasters; technical/professional assistance on policy directions or feasibility studies; intensive training of local personnel; and small business expertise—management, marketing, product design and informatics.
- RSVP International (the acronym stands for Retired and Senior Volunteers Program) has chapters in 23 countries on five continents that enlist older people in a wide range of volunteer projects. According to its president, Arthur Garson, volunteers from the developing countries are most often from the upper middle class, while those in the developed world are usually retired blue-collar workers.

Critical thoughts about self-help for the elderly

Optimism regarding the potential of older people to support themselves, sometimes overly glib propositions about the "third age" (as a synthesis of the youthful and career-establishing parts of a person's life) and a general trend towards reducing expenditure on social support systems have led some to point out that there are limits to what can be expected from the elderly.

David Nolan is a director at On Lok Senior Health Services in San Francisco, which provides cost-effective means of maintaining elderly Asian-Americans in their own homes and communities, rather than institutions. He notes that able-bodied older people volunteer at On Lok, but that "most of the people we serve are in wheelchairs, are incontinent or suffer from dementia. They've already done their fair share. It's time for them to be able to put their feet up and relax and let someone else take care of them." Nolan further feels that even a rich country like the United States is unprepared for the upcoming rapid growth in the needs of the elderly: "They aren't building nursing home beds fast enough to accommodate the wave of people who will be reaching old age. Community agencies and services should be in place to meet their needs, instead of waiting until we're in the middle of chaos and crisis."

A leader of an international agency working with the elderly in developing countries recommends caution in relying on small-scale artisanry among the elderly as a source of income, and worries that "self-help" may become a euphemism for reducing services. He suggests that the productive ageing concept is to be favoured as long as it remains within a realistic context of overall needs and capabilities.

Development and the elderly

Such a context is contained within the 1989 report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the question of ageing (A/44/420):

"The twin challenges facing countries as their populations age are how to enable the elderly to contribute to development and how to ensure them appropriate and affordable care. Ensuring such care increasingly requires a system of shared care giving by public and private sectors. As governments increasingly espouse, for humanitarian and financial reasons, policies of maintaining the elderly in the community, support programmes for informal family and community care-givers becomes more important.

The notion of productive or active ageing... reflects a concept of development, now increasingly accepted, as primarily a process of expanding the capabilities of human beings. As the elderly are enabled to be more active, self-reliant, self-determining and contributing members of society, they will become healthier and less isolated and economically dependent. Unlocking the creative potential of the elderly requires, in many places, a change of thinking, institutions and technologies. These changes now appear to be in motion."

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1255—August 1992— 6M